



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

Old State House 150 Benefit Street Providence, RI 02903

Telephone 401-222-2678
TTY 401-222-3700

Fax 401-222-2968
www.preservation.ri.gov

PRESS RELEASE PRESS RELEASE PRESS RELEASE PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE / September 13, 2005

Contact: Sarah Zurier, RIHPHC, 401-222-4142, szurier@preservation.ri.gov

**THE BIG BOUNCE:
UNITED STATES RUBBER COMPANY LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

An expansive collection of industrial buildings in the Valley neighborhood of Providence has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture and industry. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the United States Rubber Company Mill Complex to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Built incrementally between the 1880s and 1960s, the U.S. Rubber complex is significant as the location of one of the nation's largest producers of rubber goods.

The United States Rubber Company Mill Complex is located on a 23-acre site bounded by Valley Street to the north, Richmond Place to the west, Hemlock Street to the east, and the Woonasquatucket River to the south. Developed between the 1880s and the 1960s, the site includes 33 industrial buildings, overhead walkways and pipeways, interior roadways, a granite water level marker, remains of two bridges that once spanned the Woonasquatucket River, and a reinforced concrete enclosed bridge spanning Eagle Street. Most of the buildings range in height from one to

five stories, have gable roofs, and are constructed of red brick.

The site has a complicated history of ownership, use, and change. It encompasses two groups of buildings that were combined under the ownership of U.S. Rubber in 1918. The oldest building on the site was built around 1885 as an office building for the Rhode Island Locomotive Works (RILW), which produced locomotives at the eastern end of the site near Hemlock and Valley streets. American Locomotive Company, which purchased RILW in 1901, added several new buildings to manufacture trucks and cars, including the luxury Berliet Automobile sold in Europe.

The western part of the site includes several buildings erected around 1890 for the Saxon Worsted Company. In 1896, the Saxon property was sold to the Joseph Banigan Rubber Company. An Irish immigrant and self-made industrialist, Joseph Banigan established the world's largest rubber factory in Woonsocket, producing rubber boots, shoes, and components for clothes wringers. After a four-year affiliation with the United States Rubber Company, Banigan resigned in 1896, purchased the Saxon plant, and hired William Gilbane to update the facilities. New buildings were erected to create a plant for the manufacture of rubber footwear.

After Banigan's death in 1898, Walter S. Ballou took over the company, eventually selling it in 1910 to the same outfit that Banigan had quit fourteen years earlier. The property's new owner was the Revere Rubber Company, a division of U.S. Rubber. Within eight years, the plant underwent a dramatic expansion starting with a newly acquired parcel on the east side of Eagle Street. When the United States entered World War I, U.S. Rubber had difficulty meeting production orders for rubber goods, notably balloons for military use. The company purchased the idle American Locomotive Company buildings to convert them into factories for producing solid and pneumatic tires.

U.S. Rubber continued to expand into the 1920s and 1930s with the manufacture of golf balls and bath caps along with dip goods, tires, and rubber thread. Thanks to extensive military contracts during World War II, employment at the Providence plant reached an all-time high of

3200. Materials shortages and wartime demands required the plant to start synthetic rubber (neoprene) production, but the company reconverted to natural rubber production in 1948.

Faced with labor problems in the mid-1960s, U.S. Rubber reduced its staff to 480, moved much of its production out of state, and teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. Profits were few despite active production of military pontoons, various containers, and offset printing blankets. Government contracts during the Vietnam War temporarily stabilized the company (then known as Uniroyal), but fortunes continued to decline in the 1970s. Labor strife persisted until the plant announced its intent to close in April 1975. Despite efforts by the union, and local, state, and federal intervention, the Providence plant was closed in May. The present owner, Licht Properties, purchased the plant in July 1975. Current plans are underway for extensive rehabilitation of the plant and conversion to a mix of residential and commercial use.

The National Register nomination for U.S. Rubber was prepared by preservation consultant Edward Connors. According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, “Rhode Island’s industrial leadership included the early years of the rubber industry as well as its better known role in textiles, tools, and jewelry. Rehabilitation of the historic U.S. Rubber complex will continue the revitalization of Valley Street.”

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning for Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed in the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is the state agency responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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